

COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

Legal pitfalls trip up 'LegalEase'

"Take the law into your own hands."

That's how HDG Software Inc., of Sherborn, Mass., advertises its business agreements and forms system, "LegalEase." It's certainly an appealing concept.

For a one-time cost of \$129.95, you can install a whole array of legal forms on your IBM-PC or compatible computer, and never again pay a lawyer to draft the documents for your business deals. If you used it even once, it would pay for itself.

After all, when was the last time your lawyer charged you less than \$129.95 to do anything?

But even though it sounds great, I have some reservations about the product. First, let's look at some of the attractive features of this software package.

✓ Virtually any type of legal form you may use in your business

is included, some of them in several versions. There are more than 150 forms, including promissory notes, security agreements, powers of attorney, commercial leases, employment agreements and dozens more. There are corporate and partnership forms, and even a simple will.

✓ You can use the forms as they are, simply inserting the relevant information, or you can revise them to suit yourself.

✓ Because the LegalEase forms come bundled with PCWrite, you can try out that word processing package if you want to. On the other hand, you can

use the forms with other word processing software if you prefer. For instance, I found I could adapt them for use with my own favorite.

✓ It's easy to install.

So what could possibly be wrong with LegalEase? I have two quibbles, a small technical one and a

rather large legal one.

The small technical quibble is that since LegalEase is really no more than a set of documents appended to a word processing program, the program seems unnecessarily complex.

The large legal quibble, however, may make all other considerations unimportant: What are the dangers of drafting your own legal documents?

✓ You may do it wrong. LegalEase is not a "how-to" program. It provides the forms, you provide the expertise. And if you don't have any, then you take a big chance. After all, legal forms — on paper rather than on floppy disks — have been available for years at office supply stores. You don't pay your attorney for the forms, but for knowing which form to use and how to fill in the blanks so that the form does what it is intended to do.

✓ The legal language you need may not be there. Each state has its own statutes, and no "generic" set of forms such as LegalEase will cover all the possibilities.

✓ You may not know all your options. Without the advice of a lawyer, you may not know all the legal possibilities open to you, or you may try to do something that the law forbids.

However, LegalEase might be valuable for two kinds of people: First, it might make a very good beginning forms file for a new attorney — a sort of "starter kit."

Second, in the hands of an experienced business executive who already knows a great deal about the law that applies to a particular transaction, LegalEase could be a time- and money-saving program.

I don't think that LegalEase can ever substitute for legal advice. There's too much danger of mistaking "forms" for substance. But it's inexpensive enough to buy in order to try out nonetheless.

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